

Footnotes to the Archive: Memory in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Memory is often seen as a tool to recapitulate the past. But this process of recapitulation can be seen as a process of understanding a marginalized notion of the past. Seen from this standpoint, there is a proper dichotomy between the notions of memory and history. More will be discussed about the dichotomy between these two notions later. To focus on the aim of this paper first; I must state that there has been a lot of recent focus on the notion of material memory. But within its brief scope, this paper will look to understand the philosophical underpinnings and by products of the creation of a digital archive with images of objects that evoke memory. The paper will look to deal with questions like- how does the horizon of memory connected with a particular object expand with the process of archiving? What exactly is being stored in an online archive? And what are the basic differences in approach while creating differing sorts of archives? (165 words)

Keywords: Prosthetic Memory; Digital Archives; Commemoration; Trauma; Partition

Introduction

Before getting into the paper, I would like to briefly discuss the inception of this project. Working as a citizen historian for the 1947 Partition Archives, I interviewed my maternal grandmother who had migrated from Mymensingh of erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1947. While conducting this interview, I realised that her memory about the migration itself is underlined often by a comparative discussion of pre and post Partition material conditions. While the memory of the home and the surroundings remain vivid in her memory, she was more concerned about the things that were lost due to this forced migration in the first place. But she also talked about the post-Partition life of struggle with a sense of pride, focusing on the way she and her family have been able to survive the entire ordeal with flying colours.

To my surprise however, the conversation never shifted towards the sense of trauma that I was hoping to talk about in this interview. I had hoped to get through to the narratives or memories she would normally not divulge to anyone. Instead, I was already familiar with most of the events narrated by her one way or the other. While I primarily blamed my lack of experience as an interviewer for not getting through to the more silenced parts of her memory, while going through the interview questionnaire and her answers again, I realised

that her responses shifted in tonality in terms of the sorts of memories she associated them with. The questions that stayed with me as a result of this interview are questions like- what kinds of memories are normally silenced about an event of trauma and what is the politics that goes behind this process of silencing? What are the differences between processes of narrating that has its grounding solely in memory on the one hand and a process of narrating underlined by the presence of an object related to that memory on the other hand? What are the processes of archiving such narratives within museums as well as digitally? How is the process of archiving the Indian Partition different from the process of archiving other such events of trauma? And finally, what kinds of responses do these narratives evoke within the generation that is temporally far removed from the Partition and as a result is not aware of the immediate effects of this traumatizing event?

Any social event of mass violence or mass destruction evokes a sustained representation of it in mass culture. Events like the Holocaust, India-Pakistan partition or the 1971 liberation war of Bangladesh has understandably evoked diverse responses. But these responses have differed vastly from the state sponsored version to the individual versions. While Theodor Adorno stresses on the fact that no artistic response to such events can be possible at all, this has been vastly proven wrong. Hannah Arendt moreover focused on the importance of viewing the Holocaust in historical perspective to understand the full implications of the event. The notion of memory in this context has been viewed variously by critics as recapitulating a marginalized past. But the notion of memory is also viewed by many critics in a negative light. Memory in this sense is pitted against the notion of history where 'history' represents the rational notion of the past that enables engagement while memory represents a melancholic representation which calls for mourning. Maurice Halbwachs' much celebrated idea of the collective memory has been challenged in the last 25 years where digital memory constitutes a vast part of it. Adding to Maier's notion, Kerwin Lee Klein points out that it is more important to focus on who is doing the remembering and the forgetting. But Pierre Nora also points out that we talk about memory so much precisely because so little of it exists. Memory has been rather used as a tool throughout the ages as Mary Caruthers shows through her intervention on the moral role memory played in the medieval context where Church art and architecture became powerful devices to propagate same religion throughout medieval Europe. The idea of prosthetic memory of Alison Landsberg is of specific interest in this context where she identifies that mass culture has taken all historical events to the realm of the individual. This process enables every individual to internalize the memory of an event displaced from one's cultural and social context and to evoke a response that is in turn specific to that individual's socio-cultural orientation.

By placing Alison Landsberg's idea of prosthetic memory at the centre, this essay will discuss Aanchal Malhotra's project of archiving a few personal objects and her

intervention on them that has later come out as a book entitled *Remnants of a Separation*. Another text in focus will be the online archive of Amy Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas project which is "an unfinished attempt to map the pathways that give art history and cosmography its pathos-laden meanings."

Mnemosyne Project

I will first like to discuss the website on Amy Warburg's atlas and the functioning of it. The website has ten panels of Warburg archived within it. The panels are essentially an ensemble of various images put together in a single panel. They can be termed as collages in a sense. Warburg's project was to find inherent connections between these images to create a complete picture. The most interesting part about this project is the fact that no explanatory notes or commentaries are provided by the creator himself. It is here that the Mnemosyne archive sets in. The website provides guided pathways through the various images in the panels. Sometimes individual images are focused on while on other occasions, two or three images are discussed in conjunction to provide a comparative as well as simultaneous study. I would argue here that the project in itself is a practice in the realm of prosthetic memory. In Landsberg's understanding of the idea of prosthetic memory, she states that the memories connected with a particular object or image is specific to the context of that object or image itself. But when that same object is viewed by a third person, the context of that specific individual creeps in to her understanding of that specific object. The memories instigated within that individual adhere to the same.

From this standpoint, Warburg's project can be viewed to be directed at a future viewer to understand the ensemble through her/his specific context. But the aim of the archive somewhat goes against this understanding of the project. The website aims at giving a conducted guide to understand the way the panels are to be read. The commentators are highly learned and qualified professors and researchers of visual art and art history. Their commentary is guided by their scholarship and reading. To give an example, the commentary of the Panel B is provided by Spyros Pappapetros, who is an Associate Professor of History and Theory in the School of Architecture at Princeton University. Pappapetros states that the Panel B is a part of the three initial Panels of Warburg's atlas. These three panels, for him, make the central structure of the cosmology that Warburg wants to create. The Panel B is discussed in detail in the website. In this panel, various parts of the human anatomy is grouped together from differing perspectives and different ages in history. The panel is made up of nine structures arranged in three rows at the centre of which is the Vitruvian figure of the Renaissance master Leonardo da Vinci. Panel B does not simply provide differing structures of the cosmos through the entire panel, but each image also provides a cosmos in itself. From these understanding, Pappapetros infers that the different panels combine many cosmic structures which are complete in themselves to in

turn create a new cosmic structure. This cosmic structure that the panels are pointing at differ vastly from the original connotations of each of the cosmic structure individually. This panel, by uniting them, comes close to create an iconographic thread that unites all the panels. But Pappapetros also points out that there is an ideological part to this iconographic structure as well. This micro-macrocosmic structure essentially sheds light on the limits of ideology. It concerns with the way no ideology can be enough to create a universal ideology. For Pappapetros then, this atlas project proves the fallibility of such a project through its own failure to encompass the macro structure.

Before going into further discussion about the way the guided pathway is created in this website, one needs to ponder over the question about the relevance of such a project in understanding the way narratives of trauma have been documented through online archives. This website and the commentary provided on each of the panels can be seen as a model on how archives with guided pathways can be created about such images. These images are a part of the visual as well as art history of the Western canon. These are images and panels that comment on the philosophical underpinnings of the human agency and the relation between the human body and the cosmos. The shift in focus from the cosmological understanding to the geometrical understanding in the early modern science in Europe informs the context of the panels and helps in creating rhetoric around it. But to understand them from the perspective of memory studies and that too from the perspective of prosthetic memories connected to material objects, one is inclined to ponder on how the prosthetic memory is informed by this underlying philosophical rhetoric. We must keep this understanding in mind while focusing on Aanchal Malhotra's website in the latter part of the essay.

The first image in the Panel is understood by Saxl as representing the way the human body is connected with the seven planets. The body is in essence connected with the planets through rays of light. While this connection through rays represents the cosmological aspect of it, the God figure is stated to be residing outside this image and at the centre of the Panel. It is important to notice that Saxl's commentary is merely quoted in this part of the commentary. No other original commentaries are provided. This image, titled 'Radial Lines-Foot Over the Moon' is considered as one of the earliest examples of reappearance of Pagan elements in the middle ages. Next Pappapetros goes into a detailed understanding of the way the zodiac man has been represented in about five images of the panel and the way the implication of the zodiac man may vary in the different ways they can be read.

This transformation or advancement is termed as a regressive advancement. The final two images in the panel confirm the way this regressive advancement works. The final two images are those of a Pentagram and a hand. These two images act as testaments to the renaissance cosmological systems on the one hand. But on the other hand they almost act as

rudiments to an archaic belief and iconographical system according to Pappapetros. The figure is described by Agrippa in his inference on Occult philosophy in purely geometrical terms. The image is such that the figure has its arms and legs stretched in both sides. The tips of the fingers of both the feet and the arms touch the circumference of the circle if a circle is drawn by taking the navel as the centre. The stretched legs also create a triangle which is equal in all sides taking the navel as the reference point. The figure and the circle in conjugation divide the entire circle into five parts. This originates the name of the Pentagram. Agrippa proceeds in this manner to find a great number of similarities between several body parts. But these segregations seem like negative calculations after a point where cosmological implications are attached to body parts forcefully according to Pappapetros. The hand in the final image of the panel represents how Warburg focuses on the importance of Chiromancy or Palmistry still present in the supposedly rational age. By counter posing these two images, Warburg essentially tries to underline the notion of the regressive advancement and tries to drive in the central notion of the panel and in turn of the entire project itself.

But this final image also implies the centrality of the human body and human agency according to Pappapetros. It does so apparently, by underlying the fact that although human future and human agency is predetermined, this agency is concealed within the human fist and can be controlled by the human body. In the 20th century implication it can be read in the way that the entire world is within the grasp of a single human palm after the advent of the modern day technology. This reading once again underlines how these images within the panel can correspond to differing ways of conceiving the human cosmology in accordance with the day and age one reads it. But to understand the originating concepts underlying them, one needs to understand the cosmological and iconographical history attached to the origin of each of the images.

It is not in the scope of this essay to discuss all the panels archived in the website and the discussions on them in detail. But a discussion of the essential way in which the guided pathway of Panel B is created makes manifest a few features about the creation of such an archive. These panels are discussed with the underlying understanding of the medieval, early renaissance and renaissance cosmology and its geometrical underpinnings. The possibility of understanding such panels through an individual understanding is acknowledged only at the end of the discussion. The project stresses on the fact that it doesn't aim to give out a prescriptive way of understanding these panels. But the historical and ideological background is provided to open up new ways of inferring and understanding these images. Moreover, these are not images of specific events or objects connected to specific events. These are images that underline philosophical traditions and ways of reading these traditions. By grouping together various images that are on the surface unconnected to each other, Warburg tries to create a macro-microcosmic structure where the distinction

between the two gets blurred. The microcosm represents the macrocosm while often being unconnected to them.

It is on this notion of connectivity with philosophical tradition that I want to focus on for the purpose of this essay. These are not images that any person can immediately connect to. But that is true for any image whatsoever. But a person with a preliminary understanding of Western Art and Western Cosmology will also find it difficult to connect with them and create an understanding about them. To connect the image of the first human setting foot on the moon to the cosmological image of the Vitruvian man or the Pentagon structure with its feet on the moon, one needs to be connoisseur of Western Art and cosmology. These are traditions that entail to a philosophical footprint. But these images are not central to the mass memory. The aim of Warburg's project in his own words was to invigorate the memory, understanding and imagination of the contemporary reader about the "afterlife of antiquity". The creation of the Mnemosyne project underlines the fact that to have a response to these panels one need to have an understanding of the antiquity itself. So the project essentially aims at the creation of a memory of the antiquity so that the response can be possible. The memory invoked in the minds of the viewers of these images can be termed in turn as a prosthetic one in this regard. But it is in essence a 'double prosthetic' memory. Here, the memory of the context and the connected political and cultural significance has to be implanted in the memory of the viewer through reference points.

It is important to go back to the dichotomy between memory and history at this point discussed at the beginning of the essay. It has been already discussed how a negative view has often been attributed to the notion of memory where memory is viewed as fiction and history as fact. But memory in this understanding, also acquires the power of reinvigorating a marginalized notion of the past- one that has been forgotten through a flux of official narratives. By making the original connotations and attributes of the images in the Panels of Amy Warburg, the Mnemosyne Project enables the viewer to have an individualized response to these images as opposed to the mediated ones. It is a bit paradoxical though that the original reference points are presented to us through the digital medium and a mediated voice. But the website does not look to regulate the response of the viewers to the panels themselves.

Remnants of A Separation

Another website/text that this essay will focus on is Aanchal Malhotra's *Remnants of a Separation: A History of the Partition through Material Memory*. As opposed to the Mnemosyne Project where the panels of Warburg were meant to shed an insight on the afterlife of antiquity, Aanchal Malhotra sought to understand the event of Partition through a collection of everyday objects that have acquired a certain cultural and historical

importance due to their connection to the Partition and the mass displacement/migration following the event. The Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 gave vein to the largest mass migration in the history of mankind. The effects of the event still persist within the imagination of the residents of South Asia through direct or indirect association with it. As a direct by-product of the Partition, the 1971 Bangladesh liberation war happened as a result of which millions once again had to migrate from Bangladesh to India and the other way round.

The responses to the other side of the border have come down to us through the ways they have been portrayed to us by our elders. My grandparents from both the maternal and the paternal side migrated to India from Bangladesh. This was not during the 1971 war. But was during the Partition. Coming from a personal experience, the image of 'desh' has come down to me through their eyes. In my childhood I would imagine our 'desh' to be a place filled with laughter and joy where we had huge houses and paddy fields to ourselves only for everything to be taken away by the Partition (To point out that this view is a vastly problematic one can only be an understatement). But they would often refrain from talking about the actual migration and the way the entire process unfolded. It is interesting to note in Malhotra's projects that these objects that the survivors hold so dear to themselves enable them to talk about this process. The fact that the object survived with them attributes almost a similar status to the objects to themselves. These objects almost become their alter-egos. This in turn enables them to narrate the story of how the object was brought to its present place. The journey of the object acts as a testimony to the journey of the individual. The initial response to the fall of the empire and the creation of the Radcliffe line was one of disbelief and denial states Malhotra.

Haimanti Roy in her essay, "A Partition of Contingency: Public Discourse in Bengal 1946-47" points out that the public response varied vastly during the Partition. But the overarching belief in the general public till the actual event happened was that this could never have happened. Roy's essay provides a counter-narrative to the narrative that the Partition was a culmination point of a long standing divide between the Hindu and the Muslim community and that the Partition was inevitable due to this reason. Citing examples from many of the public debates in the two years leading to the Partition and many letters written to the editors of many leading newspapers, Roy states that the Partition was contingent on many discourses and that the creation of the Radcliff Line along with its implementation was a haphazard decision to say the least. From the perspective of the official narrative this narrative is an aberrant one. But in Malhotra's intervention, we see that the individual responses and the oral narratives related to the partition in fact support this view. The 1947 Partition Archive is a huge repertoire of many such oral narratives. Even though it is not within the scope of this paper to focus on these narratives and this

archive, it is important to acknowledge that the process of creation of such an archive has contributed to the works like that of Aanchal Malhotra's.

Coming back to the project of Malhotra, she states in the introduction of her book how memory is essentially malleable in nature. It must be kept in mind that when a person remembers a past, the event is in parts reconstructed within the mind of the person remembering. Our mind is not a mnemonic device that can store and remember everything in ditto for them to be retraced in the future. This understanding has contributed largely to the process of viewing memory as an inauthentic history. But these are personal histories. And often personal histories tell the real story much more than the official one. However, it is not the purpose of this essay to argue for the authenticity/inauthenticity of history/memory. The aim of this part of the essay is to discuss memories connected with an event of recent history and the images connected with them. The Mnemosyne project, in this respect acts as a counterpoint to Malhotra's archive.

This brings us to the understanding of the nature of Malhotra's archive and the objects she chooses. Each chapter of her book is named after a certain object that belongs to a certain Partition survivor. These are everyday objects that attain significance only due to their relation to the event specific to the person who have retained them. For a prosthetic memory of these objects to be evoked in the viewer, the viewer has to understand the historical importance connected to them. Malhotra tries to bridge the gap of the intangibility of the event to a generation who has not directly experienced the event through these objects. She states in the introduction of her book that these objects are tangible and they in turn make the intangible tangible. They also in turn evoke a sense of belonging for the viewer. She also talks about the nature of this sort of memory. She differentiates between the notions of collective, generational and inherited memory. Collective memory is often shaped by the official narratives. Generational memory on the other hand is often specific to a particular family or household and is oral in nature. Inherited memory is seen by her in similar light. She connects the notion of images with the aspect of inherited memory in her work's context. The images form generational and inherited memory in the particular context. The aim of her work is to make them accessible to the collective consciousness enabling a plethora of subsequent secondary and prosthetic memories. She has combined images with words in her work to make these memories accessible.

Point-Counter Point

It is at this point that we must look at the way these images are different from the images archived in the Mnemosyne project. The images that are archived in the Mnemosyne project have meanings and contexts embedded within the image/structures themselves. But the images that Malhotra chooses, acquire significance only through extra-textual context. The image of a heirloom, some pearls, a *Hamam-Dasta*, a shawl or a Identification certificate

don't necessarily catch our consciousness the way the image of a Vitruvian man does. The latter is at the outset something that is out of the normal and encourages us to delve deeper into its history and origin. But these everyday objects acquire importance only when the stories that are connected to them are stated along with the image of the object. It is only when we get to know that these set of pearls were gifted to a young woman by the person she was supposed to marry in their last meeting. And that she migrated amidst riots that killed the man with these pearls as her last memory of him that makes us delve deeper into the object.

But this object catches the imagination of the viewer in almost the opposite way to that of the Vitruvian man. The Vitruvian man makes us curious about the image itself where we try to understand what the creator was trying to portray through the image itself. The pearls on the other hand take us away from the object and its context to muse on the way other such narratives must have transpired. It can also evoke a sense of a personal loss. Malhotra states how after her interaction with her grandmother she felt guilty for what had happened to her grandmother. She could not understand the reason behind this guilt. It is probably embedded in the prosthetic memories evoked by these images. Narration of an event of cruelty can make us sad. But it can also make us guilty for acting in a somewhat similar manner in a different context. A basic dichotomy can be noted by juxtaposing these two images. The Vitruvian man calls for our understanding. But the pearls, in a way, evoke imagination.

Both sets of images, seen from this standpoint, call for footnotes attached to them. But as we have seen through our discussion of these two archives, the footnotes must differ vastly in nature. In the introductory discussion I had tried to chart that memory studies has taken largely in the Western academia to reach the contemporary point. Now the focus is strongly directed towards the importance of material memory in understanding individual/ised narratives. The idea of prosthetic memory that I use extensively in my essay is a result of this shift in focus from the macro to the micro (narrative). But the larger question that such a discussion leaves us with is the purpose of theorising itself in the face of events of trauma. Whereas the theoretical ideas talked about in the introduction have come into being largely following an events of trauma in the 20th century, it is important to note that the Indian Partition calls for a multi-layered indigenous set of theorisation. We can attempt appropriating the ideas of inherited memory or prosthetic memory to the different contexts. But it becomes apparent in the examples discussed in this essay that this attempt only makes it clearer to us how every event is essentially different and each context calls for its own set of theoretical abstractions. I have tried to chart the possible path that can be taken in reaching the point of this abstraction. But a truly indigenous theoretical framework will have to stem from Indian sociological and philosophical ideations which calls for a different discussion altogether.

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